

"How to Teach Your Child to Read"
by Deborah Brinker

At the end of every school year, when the older children are preparing to head off for Kindergarten, there is usually some concern among the parents about whether or not the children will be prepared for public school. One of the main questions that I hear from parents enrolling their child in Montessori school is: "Will my child be able to read when he goes to Kindergarten?" My answer is always the same: "It depends on the child." So much research has been done on the subject of reading and writing that I could talk about it all day, but I will try to put it as simply as possible. In all my years of teaching children to read, if I have learned one thing, it is this: You cannot push a child to learn to read. When they are ready, you will know.

The most important thing you can do for your child to help him be ready to read is to prepare his environment for reading. Have colorful books on many different subjects around the house for him to look at. Instead of watching TV, read a book aloud and run your finger under the words as you read them. Talk about things with your child. Go outside and explore. Work on problem solving. Ask lots of open-ended questions. If you would like more information on setting up your child's environment, read my "Montessori in the Home" article.

When teaching reading at One World Montessori School, we use an approach which combines phonetics and whole language. Whole language is a teaching process in which children are taught reading in a variety of ways instead of just sticking to one method. The child is first introduced to letters and sounds, and after a couple sounds are mastered, the child can, ideally, begin to spell and read words by linking the sounds together. Words that don't follow the general rules and patterns of English are called "sight words", and once the child has gained confidence in his language skills, literacy and reading can be used to enhance their studies in other parts of the classroom, such as in science and history. We also place an emphasis on teaching children pre-writing and writing skills. Children are encouraged to practice these language skills through music, art, drama, and storytelling. In this way, they are learning how to express their thoughts verbally.

All of the materials and activities in the Montessori classroom are preparing the child for reading and writing. All of the materials are set up from left to right, which trains the eyes for reading. The concepts of comparing and contrasting shapes, colors and ideas are introduced through the Sensorial lessons, as well as gradation of concepts and colors. The pink tower teaches comparisons of size and shape, and gradation of size. The colored spools teach the colors and concepts of grading from lightest to darkest. Then the words for these concepts are taught using the 3 Period Lesson, which I will explain later. Tracing and drawing the metal insets and learning the names of the shapes helps with writing and discriminating different shapes in letters. The sandpaper letters teach the short vowel sounds and the hard consonant sounds. The sandpaper letters are traced using two fingers, which later helps with the child's pencil grip. Spelling using the moveable alphabet usually follows. We start out concretely by spelling words with the moveable alphabet and matching them to small objects (cat, mat, pig, etc.), and then we move on to the more abstract by spelling words with the moveable alphabet and matching them to pictures. Even though a child can spell a word, in the beginning many children can't read the word they have spelled.

This teaching technique prepares the child for literacy, reading, and comprehension in public school, but as we well know, Montessori schools are different from public schools in a number of ways. In the Montessori classroom, children are given more individual attention and guided instruction from the teacher, due to smaller class sizes and a typically smaller student-to-teacher ratio. Because children are given more instruction and also given more opportunities to explore reading on their own, they grasp literacy concepts early on and learn to use these concepts on their own and while interacting with peers. In an environment like this which is very conducive and supportive of reading and literacy, it is evident why students will pick up the skills for reading well and also integrate these skills into daily life.

When you feel like your child is ready to learn to read, you can integrate Montessori methods into your own teaching. We use a method called the "Three Period Lesson" which is very useful when teaching letter sounds. Use this lesson with about 3 letters at a time. Montessori starts off teaching lower case letters. If you can find lower case refrigerator magnet letters, they would be perfect for teaching at home.

First Period: "This is..." Point to the letter and say the phonetic sound.

Second Period: "Show me..." Name a letter and have the child point to the letter.

We do many repetitions with the second period of the lesson, using a variety of expressions, such as: Put the "a" in my hand. Place the "c" on the table. Carry the "b" to the chair.

Third Period: "What is this?" When you are pretty sure your child remembers each letter, ask "What is this?" for each letter to test his memory.

If you start to sense your child getting fidgety or bored, put the letters away immediately and work on something else. The last thing we want is for the child to associate reading with something negative. Dr. Montessori is quoted as saying, "In a word, one must proceed in the first instance with the aim of rousing keen interest in reading, and afterwards the way will be prepared for the long journey necessary to overcome the various difficulties of spelling."

Once the child has mastered his letter sounds, we are ready for writing and reading--child willing! Montessori included in reading the skills of writing, grammar, spelling and comprehension. Some children who make sentences with the moveable alphabet (or refrigerator magnets) will want to write out their sentences with paper and pencil. If your child shows interest in making books, by all means, let him make a book! Provide plenty of art materials if the children want to draw pictures to illustrate their book.

At this juncture, words such as "the" are introduced using the 3 Period Lesson. Some words in English will have to be memorized for reading and spelling. You can also let your child match words to pictures in books, or objects around the house. Maria Montessori used toys with labels for first reading exercises. In "The Montessori Method" she writes, "We then put away the toys and set ourselves to make hundreds of written labels--names of children, of objects, of cities, of colors and of qualities made known through exercises of the senses. We placed them in more boxes and let the children search as they pleased among them. I expected that at least they would hunt indiscriminately and without any order in one box and in another, but no, every child finished emptying the box which he had under his hand, and only after that did he go on to another, truly insatiable for reading." Later on she explains, "So we had nothing more to do but present them with a book; in fact they read the words in it."

Dr. Montessori discovered that, in addition to determining children's eventual height, hair color, and other physical characteristics, there is another cognitive plan which determines the unique emotional and intellectual qualities of each child. These qualities develop through what Montessori referred to as "the sensitive periods." Each sensitive period is a specific kind of compulsion, motivating young children to seek objects and relationships in their environment with which to fulfill their special and unique inner potentials. The sensitive period for writing is typically between the ages of 3 and 4, in which the child has a fascination with the attempt to reproduce letters and numbers with pencil or pen and paper. Montessori discovered that writing precedes reading. The sensitive period for reading is between the ages of 3 and 5. During this period, the child shows a spontaneous interest in the symbolic representations of the sounds of each letter and in the formation of words. How long does it take a child to read during this sensitive time? According to Montessori, as little as 15 days! "Experience tells us that, counting from the moment at which the child can write, the passage from this lower form of written language to the higher one of reading is an average about fifteen days." But... "Accuracy in reading, however, almost always comes later than perfection in writing. In most cases, the child writes very well and reads just fairly well. Dr. Montessori does say that children learn to read at different ages. Most Montessori children can read beautifully by the end of 2nd grade.

If you were to ask a Kindergarten teacher, she would probably tell you that the most important skill that a child needs to know before he enters Kindergarten is "How to follow directions." By enrolling your child in Montessori preschool, you are laying the basic foundation for your child's future. Most children in Kindergarten haven't received that foundation, so as a parent, you can rest assured that your child will be ahead of the game by the time he goes to public school.